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# Between realism and abstraction

Shi-ling Chen Hsiang

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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Fine and Applied Arts  
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ART

***BETWEEN REALISM AND ABSTRACTION***

by

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March 10, 1987

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## I. Background

### A. The Question of Realism and Abstraction

In the history of art, there have been many acclaimed artists who left us with memorable treasures. Their great works of art can generally be categorized, at the risk of oversimplification, into realistic art, abstract art, and those that fall in between. The main interest of this thesis is to explore the third area in which a subtle balance between abstraction and realism can be found. Works of Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, Henri Matisse, and several other artists will be discussed in this context for later examination of the author's work.

The first question then is *what is "abstraction" and what is "realism" ?* Providing a clear definition of the terms "realism" and "abstraction" has not been easy even among the art historians. John R. Lane, in his book Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944, explained that it is one of the paradoxes of the twentieth century art that *"the more the art has distanced itself from the imitation of the natural appearances -- that is the more abstract it has become -- the more vehemently insistent have been its creators that their work is realistic"*.<sup>1</sup> This claim is founded on the modernist's aesthetic principle that each art form should seek to reduce itself to its essential ingredients. In the case of painters and sculptors, this has meant, first and foremost, concentrating, organizing, and manipulating the means of expression -- line, color, light, shade, form, and space -- to create *"art that merits appreciation without needing to justify its existence by making imitative references to subjects in the natural world"*,<sup>2</sup> although in modern art those references to recognizable imagery may still be there. The logic of modernist's reductivism led the modern art toward

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1. John R. Lane, Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America: 1927-44, p.10.

2. *Ibid.*, p.11.

abstraction and, as abstraction became more extreme, its practitioners utilized an ever more complex vocabulary to explain its nuances and started countless semantic battles. Among these, *"a more substantive debate was centered on the differences between those who based their art on the observation of natural world and then abstracted from their preceptions, and those who maintained that true abstract art could not be referential but must be the exclusive product of invented forms"*.<sup>3</sup> Among these *avantgardes*, some advocated "abstraction from nature" -- these were the Cubists. On the other side of the fence were various schools of geometric abstraction who insisted on "nonobjective" or "pure" abstraction. By the early 1940's, the non-object point of view had come to dominate. And such dominance lasted for more than three decades.<sup>4</sup>

In this thesis, the term "realism" is used to refer to paintings intended to portray or imitate the natural world by creating a three-dimensional illusion on a two-dimensional surface, and generally by means of "perspective", "shading", and "overlapping". The term "abstraction" refers to paintings that seek to reduce itself to its essential ingredients -- mainly lines, colors and geometric forms. Falling in between are paintings in which characteristics of both realism and abstraction are present.

Following these definitions, we find that realistic art has indeed enjoyed its leading role throughout the history of western art for nearly 4000 years. It can be traced back as far as 2000 B.C. to the Greek Classicism and still remains strong in today's American art scene, represented by artists of Photo-Realism. The abstract art, on the other hand, has flourished immensely since the turn of 20th century and become the main stream of the contemporary art, notably represented by the Expressionists and the Color-Field painters. Yet with only a few

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3,4. John R. Lane, Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America: 1927-44, p.11.

exceptions such as Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (Illustration 1), most great works of art that fall in between abstraction and realism have not enjoyed the equal esteem which they deserve. Critics and historians today have grown accustomed to classifying these works roughly as the realistic art or the abstract art, or simply neglecting them for their being neither. The purpose of this thesis is then to explore this fascinating domain where the abstract merges into the spatial and the organic interweaves with the geometric.

## B. The Cubists

In this section, works of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Juan Gris will be reviewed as examples that achieved the balance between abstraction and realism. It is clearly out of the scope of this thesis to make an in-depth analysis of each of them; rather, only the segments of each artist's work that are relevant to the subject of this research will be discussed.

The first artist is Pablo Picasso (1881-1974), one of the great Cubists who dared their old world with revolutionary visions and led the modern art into the 20th century. Picasso has a particularly interesting attitude towards abstraction and realism. He once made an eloquent refutation of the abstract art: *"From the point of view of art, forms are neither abstract nor concrete; they are simply forms - lies - some of which are more convincing than others".*<sup>5</sup> He further elaborated, *"There is no abstract art. One must always begin with something. Then all traces of reality can be removed. There isn't any danger then, because the idea of the object has left an indelible mark. It is what moved the artist originally, inspired his ideas, set his emotions to vibrating. In the end his ideas and emotions become imprisoned in his painting. No matter what happens, they can no*

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5. Hans L. C. Jaffé, Pablo Picasso, p.11.



*longer escape from the picture".<sup>6</sup>*

From these lines one can sense Picasso's commitment, his attachment to the subject of his paintings -- the objects in life.<sup>7</sup> There is certainly no shortage of examples in Picasso's work to support this view. I will use two powerful examples to demonstrate this point. First, "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)" of 1907 (see Illustration 1). This 96"x92" canvas pointed the way to the Cubist revolution and marked the turning point of modern art. The painting shows a figurative composition of five nudes grouped around a still-life in the foreground. The abstract forms of the human body confronted the viewers in all their angular, grandiosely conceived ponderousness.<sup>8</sup> The central figures standing in their mask-like repose are reminiscent of the classical Greek sculptures; but the figures at either side, especially their heads, disclose a new treatment which by definition of this thesis, explore the territory in between abstraction and realism. These heads have been built out of large, firmly defined planes, which are not modeled by light or by the contours that light reveals, but are as though hacked out with knife and chisel. Especially the heads of the two nudes at the right side reveal the will to new form: the most dramatic contrasts supplant ordinary transitions, and thus in a magical violence the new pictorial idiom is born. Even the space in which the figures stand seems to be sculptured -- it is not an atmosphere, as in Picasso's earlier realistic works, but a volume, a mass.<sup>9</sup> "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)" has been called the first truly 20th-century painting for its fearless challenge toward the old divine rule of realism -- a fixed perspective for a picture! So much magical power and compelling force has been achieved in this painting, it is clear that its success can not simply be derived from its creator's "intention" to overturn an

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6,7. Hans L. C. Jaffé, Pablo Picasso, p.11.

8. *Ibid.*, p.64.

9. *Ibid.*, p.65.

old tradition, but rather from his genius to manipulate the subject's pictorial idioms between abstraction and realism.

The second example from Picasso is "Still-Life with Pitcher, Candle, and Enamel Pot" (see Illustration 2), painted in 1945. The forms of the still-life are reduced to its basics. A pitcher, a candle, and an enamel pot sit on an angular table with their black shadows in a gray-toned space. There is no reasonable explanation for its light source. The painting was executed in a vigorous, simple formal language: Picasso has rediscovered things in their modest form and dignity. But he also discovered new aspects of them, and endowed them with new significance.<sup>10</sup> Thus the juxtaposition of the simplified objects on a table becomes a monument to the quiet dignity of everyday things and a milestone of powerful still-life paintings in between abstraction and realism.

Next let us examine Georges Braque (1882-1963), the other founder of Cubism. Braque contributed to the most important pictorial revolution of our century. His decisive role in destroying the imitation of objects and of pageantry has been significant. As will be discussed in later sections, Braque had the strongest influence on my artistic conceptualization for this thesis.

There is an interesting comment made by the French critic, Maurice Gieure, in 1956, about what one can learn from Braque and his contemporaries: *"All we can get out of Matisse are displays of chromatic daring. Dufy can convey nothing but his gift for subtle fancifulness. And Picasso? Nothing. Picasso cannot be done over, only plagiarized. From Braque, however, one can learn everything: first of all, the value of the painters' vocation as craftsmanship, in other words, technique; then, the importance of the concept that must govern, prepare, and preside over the*

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10. Hans L. C. Jaffé, Pablo Picasso, p.114.

picture, before as well as during the act of creation; then, the poetics, the spirituality incorporated into work. But above all, we learn from him that an artist's personality is not some endless effort to attain ever-higher levels of extravagance, but a process of reflection, of meditation followed by a moment of fertilization, an obsession, a haunting that is slowly expressed in the work of art".<sup>11</sup> One does not have to agree with Maurice Gieure's opinion on Braque's contemporaries; but what he had to say about Braque's art and personality is certainly significant. Braque's persistence in still-life has set a perfect example for painters to come as to how one may count up what one does best and take it to a summit where no one reached. His constant effort of enhancing the still-life has brought unequalled beauty, substance and meaning which make those works most difficult to surpass.

Contrary to Braque's early, analytical Cubism work, his later paintings have often been described as "philosophical", presenting the irrationality of life, along with his masterful craftsmanship in art. As John Russell stated, "*These late Braques are philosophical paintings, even if the manner of their presentation is irresistably voluptuous. Such a gamut of sanded tans, so close a conjunction of purple and violet had rarely been seen before. As surely as the Surrealists, but with none of their sensational or pathological subject matter, Braque in the 1930s reintroduced the irrational into painting. What Braque wanted at that time was to achieve an equipoise, peculiar to himself, between logic and the free play of instinct -- and between the strict scaffolding of Cubism as it had evolved before 1914 and the fluidity and irrationality of life as it actually presents itself*".<sup>12</sup>

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11. Raymond Cogniat, *Braque*, p.61.

12. John Russell, *The Meaning of Modern Art*, p.284.



An example of such work can be seen in Illustration 3, "The Studio" (1939). In this painting, Braque explored the structural potential of objects, seized the opportunities provided by the transparency of material and the interdependence of forms, all the while depersonalizing or particularizing his themes. Thus he had at his disposal an extremely varied stock of plastic terms. Braque's ability to suggest things without having to describe them enabled him to express their essence. *"Angular, false wood-grained slabs, curving vases, and the decorative arabesques of fabrics are combined freely. All of the shapes interact and overlap to form a richly suggestive state of disorder"*.<sup>13</sup> Braque's paintings of this period bring to mind our dreams, those old attics, cluttered with assorted memories, that open out to the poetry of the imagination. One could also point out the division of the canvas into vertical sections, compare the static and the dynamic elements, take stock of the different materials, and above all marvel at that magical space, at once near and far away with no breaks in between.

Another great example of Braque's philosophical paintings during the 1940s and 50s is "The Studio (V)" painted in 1949 (Illustration 4). Here the closed universe of the studio with its bric-a-brac of memories is invaded by a bird that brings with it the alien from outside world. Space and movement makes its insolent presence felt, only to find itself in turn falling under the spell that surrounds it.<sup>14</sup> Without the bird, this peculiar, haunting solitude would not be so palatable and physically perceptible, nor would the union of material and spiritual be so irrevocable.<sup>15</sup> To achieve this effect, Braque does not resort to a symbolic language reserved for a selected few: we are not expected to guess the metaphysical meaning of the objects. Using nothing more than he, as a painter, has at his disposal, Braque

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13. Raymond Cogniat, *Braque*, p.138.

14. *Ibid.*, p.56.

15. *Ibid*, p.156.

creates a magical world all of his own. Objects are reduced to its essentials, and space crystalized. It is as if he had taken a sheet of plate glass and set it in front of the painting, between the spectacle and the spectator. Although the observer can see it, he cannot touch it, nor can he interfere with its unfolding mystery. With paintings like "The Studio (V)", Braque has created myths, as though wishing to give substance to the intangible. It is a masterpiece that blurs the distinction between the real and the imaginary, the literal and the metaphorical;<sup>16</sup> and a masterpiece which indeed falls in between abstraction and realism.

Stanislas Fumet, author of the book Braque, said it well: *"The art of Braque did not let its dynamism waste away through dreamy escapism. Dreams, no. Ideals, no. Hope, as much as one desired, but sparkled within us by an everpresent allusion to the real world. This is where art -- expressed in paint, but sacrificing modeling for modulation -- became the seed of matchless harmonies whose power to vary themselves grew day by day through exquisite combination of simultaneous, independent forms and colors".*<sup>17</sup> Such praise is truly the highest a painter could achieve.

The third Cubist discussed here is Juan Gris (1887-1927). Most of people who admire Gris' paintings, according to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, consider his classical architecture period from 1916 to 1919 as the peak of his achievement.<sup>18</sup> But for those who enjoy mystery over sobriety, Gris' paintings such as "Still-Life Before an Open Window" of 1915 (Illustration 5) and "The Check Table-Cloth" of 1916 (Illustration 6) appear to be the most fascinating. Instead of trying to follow the rigid principles of the later classical architecture period, Gris

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16. John Russell, The Meaning of Modern Art, p.282.

17. Raymond Cogniat, Braque, p.61.

18. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Juan Gris; His Life and Work, p.132.



ventured onto the edge of abstraction and realism: What one finds in these two paintings are stylized objects that appear to exist in an illusion of space, with organic shapes contrasted by geometric shapes. The result is an enchanting series of works which can not be categorized as any standard "-ism". Gris once used the words of André Masson to define great art: "*Great painting is painting in which the intervals are charged with as much energy as the shapes which determine them.*"<sup>19</sup> "Still-Life Before an Open Window" and "The Check Table-Cloth" certainly belong to great paintings of such kind.

### C. Other Stylistic Influence

In addition to the three Cubists, my paintings have also received influence from several other artists. Heading the list is Henri Matisse (1869-1954). Matisse has a special way of combining patterns, windows and walls. For example, in his "Harmony in Red" (painted 1908-09, Illustration 7), Matisse carried the same floral pattern up the wall and down the table where the patterns on the table seem to come alive. The stylized landscape, seen through the window at upper left, reinforces the floral arabesques of the interior, setting up a provocative dialogue between nature itself and its decorative transformation found in the interior.<sup>20</sup> This painting is a wonderfully successful piece that falls, once again, between abstraction and realism. The overall view of the picture is an approximate frontality. Its eye level, when judged in term of Renaissance perspective, is just above the sill of the window, hence almost at a median level. In producing one of his most flattened, tapestry-like works to that date, Matisse employed an extraordinarily conventional, if almost invisible, underpinning of Renaissance perspective, reaching back behind the innovations and

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19. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Juan Gris: His Life and Work, p.132.

20. John Jacobus, Henri Matisse, p.70.

distortions employed by artists of the previous century.<sup>21</sup> This painting indicates Matisse's ambition to develop in large format a motif that is customarily treated in a more intimate fashion and has not been considered worthy of the same attention from artists of 19th century as large figure paintings or portraiture.<sup>22</sup> Matisse's ingenuity in manipulating colors, patterns and space has made this 70"x86" painting not only a monument in physical size but a major contribution to the equalization and democratization of hierarchies in the subject matter.<sup>23</sup>

Another pair of artists have influenced the choice of the composition of the thesis paintings. They are Hasegawa Tohaku (1539-1610), a 16th century master of monochrome and polychrome paintings<sup>24</sup> and Ogata Korin (1658-1716), the 18th century mainstay of the Sotatsu-Korin School in Japan.<sup>25</sup> Tohaku and his school's oversized (in excess of 6'x16') colors on paper panel entitled: "Maple Tree and Autumn Plants" (1592, Illustration 8)<sup>26</sup>, and Korin's paired screen paintings "White and Red Plum Trees" (each 61"x68", Illustration 9)<sup>27</sup> are enlightening demonstrations of how forceful and dynamic a balanced composition can be. What charms us above all in "Maple Tree and Autumn Plants" is the eager, vital movement of the trunk as it shoots out its branches on either side. The same vitality quickens the autumn plants in bloom at the foot of the tree; their colors, standing out sharply against the gold background representing the soil or clouds, are bright and harmonious. The grace of movement, the serenity of tones and the freshness of expression within a dynamic and balanced composition characterize the masterly style of Hasegawa Tohaku. In "White and Red Plum Trees", curves and circles, the permanent motifs of Ogata Korin's

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21-23. John Jacobus, Henri Matisse, p.70.

24. Akiyama Terukazu, Japanese Paintings, p.127.

25. *Ibid.*, p.153.

26. *Ibid.*, p.131.

27. *Ibid.*, p.155.

style, seem to be crystallized in the flowing stream whose surface is patterned with swirling ripples. With their supple forms and free flowing lines, based on a keen observation of nature, the plum trees stand in contrast with the decorative, almost abstract treatment of the stream. The different colors of the flowers and opposing movements of the branches are carefully balanced against each other.<sup>28</sup> This composition, so rich in contrasts and so intense in movements, is nevertheless balanced! One wonders why anyone would tamper with the old commencement of balanced composition?

During the early stage of this thesis, an experiment was conducted under the assumption that by manipulating the tonality and intensity of colors, one could create a new order of balance and suspense through a structurally unbalanced composition. Thanks to these two Japanese painters, a forceful and balanced composition that could be just as suspensive and without evermore complicated pictorial problems was realized.

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28. Akiyama Terukazu, Japanese Paintings, p.156.



## II. The Thesis Paintings

The thesis paintings are the result of an intensive search for personal expression in style and in substance. They can be grouped into two categories, representing two directions undertaken in the studio works. For the first category, the painting "A Winter's Tale" is used as example. The subjects in this category are personified still-lives, with strong architectural elements. For the second category, four examples, the "Still-Life in Four Seasons", will be given as they represent a complete series with variations in color scheme, in structural design, and in personal symbolism. The subjects in this series of paintings are personified still-lives supported by objects, landscapes, and creatures.

### A. A Winter's Tale

Composed at the end of spring, 1985, the title of this work (Illustration 10) was inspired by William Shakespeare, "*A sad tale's best for winter*".<sup>29</sup> This painting reflects a flatter and more abstract approach when compared with later series.

There are five stylized tea pots spread from the lower left end of canvas toward the top right edge of the canvas. The principal objects, the teapots, were personified. A largely unoccupied canvas carries a deep, dark blue tone, out of which figurative lines suggestive of heads, busts, and arms interweave with architectural lines suggestive of stairs and walls. Together they form the interior and exterior of the teapots, each standing like an individual entity. The lid of the top right teapot flips and heads toward an obvious ill destiny. The tension is further intensified by three unhappy figures in the bottom left pot. The total effect was intended to be dramatic. The treatment of the

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29. Said Mamilius in Act II of The Winter's Tale, William Shakespeare.

images was relatively flat and abstract, the palette cold and restrained. It reflects its author's weariness of today's fragile family structures.

#### B. Still-Lives in Four Seasons

The idea of "four seasons" originated from the timeless music of Antonio Vivaldi, "Le Quattro Stagioni" (the four seasons). This series began in April, 1985, after a long and dreary winter. The refreshing spring air flowed through the the first petals of tulips, daffodils, magnolia, and pear blossoms, which had just started their awakening, inviting a transcription of the warm and lively to the canvas.

*"Joyful Spring has arrived.  
The birds welcome it with their happy songs.  
And the brooks in the gentle breezes  
Flow with a sweet murmur.  
The sky is covered with a black mantle.  
Thunder and lightning announce a storm.  
When they are silent, the birds  
take up again their harmonious songs.  
And in flower-rich meadow,  
to the gentle murmur of leaves and plants,  
the goatherd sleeps, his faithful dog at his side.  
To the merry sounds of a rustic bagpipe,  
Nymphs and shepherds dance in their beloved spot,  
when Spring appears in its brilliance".* <sup>30</sup>

Since the still-life was going to be combined with nature, the author thought it would be a challenging and complete series if four paintings, each of them representing a totally different feeling and atmosphere befitting the season, could be made.

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30. Antonio Vivaldi, Le Quattro Stagioni.

Later, following the completion of "Still-Life in Summer" (Illustration 11) in October, 1985, this concept was reaffirmed. Sequentially, "Still-Life in Autumn" (Illustration 12) was finished in November, 1985, "Still-Life in Winter" (Illustration 13) in January, 1986, and "Still-Life in Spring" (Illustration 14) in April, 1986. These paintings were exhibited at Graduate Thesis Show in Bevier Gallery, RIT, in April, 1986 and later at Pinnacle Gallery of Rochester in September, 1986.

As described at the beginning of this chapter, the "Still-Lives in Four Seasons" represent a complete series with variations in color scheme, in structural design, and in personal symbolism. However, there are also similarities in the development of images, in the indirect painting process, and in the stylistic choice which make up the identities of this series. These similarities will be discussed in this chapter, using "Still-Life in Summer" as an example while the variations will be discussed in the next chapter.

The development of images for each of the four paintings was started with what the painter considered as the essence and spirit of the particular season. For instance, in "Still-Life in Summer" (3'x5', acrylics on canvas), "horizontal expansion" and "vigorous movement" were considered the essence of the season. To experiment with ways of expressing this concept, several drawings were made. First, a 10"x14" and two 19"x24" charcoals were made of a picnic table with bottles, goblets and tablecloth in the painter's patio. The subjects as well as their arrangements were varied. Combining the best elements of these drawings with some fresh plants and flowers, another large-size 28"x40" charcoal drawing was finished to provide the foundation for the eventual composition. In addition, a 6"x10" sketch in color pencils was made for color reference. This example is typical of the preparatory steps taken in this series of paintings to penetrate conceptual ideas onto a solid canvas.



For "Still-Life in Summer", following the experimentation, a group of still-lives that included a large chablis container, two beer bottles, a water jar, and several wine glasses were spread across an oval table covered by a tablecloth with vigorous patterns of daffodils and leaves. These objects, fenced and guarded by rail-like horizontal bars, were invaded by the plants behind them and the motif beneath them. Even the bee-like creatures at upper right corner were made to look suspicious and threatening.

The technique applied in the Summer painting was an indirect one, again typical throughout the series. Step 1 of the process is a complex underpainting. Two coats of underpaint were brushed on from a mixture of ivory black and cerulean blue, with a touch of deep magenta, cadmium red, and burnt umber. The mixture provided a rich dark tone for the background as well as for the lines shown through the bottom of the canvas. An accurate line drawing was then made with white charcoal as step 2 to indicate the composition. Step 3 was the most painstaking part of the entire process. It involved using masking tapes and crépe tapes of various sizes to mask all the lines on the canvas. After the boundaries among the objects were defined and the lines protected, step 4 was full of great moments. Bold brushings were made with speed and spontaneity on large areas such as the sky and the table. Colors were mixed and mingled on the canvas. At least 85% of colors needed for the painting was laid down during this period. Step 5 was to remove all tapes: rich, exquisite black outlines now revealed themselves around the brilliant colors applied from the previous step. In step 6, edges that were intended to be bright were surrounded, again by tapes, and then underpainted with pigments of iridescent gold and filled in with a mixture of white, yellow, gold, and raw sienna. This created an effect of bright edges that would glow under a spot light. In step 7, the last group of tapes were lifted, and finishing touches were applied.

This complex drawing method, the indirect painting process, together with a free play of subtle shiftings between geometric forms and organic forms, resulted in an individual style that, if one were to read into it, presents itself as a combination of surrealism, personal symbolism, and an emulation of the oriental concept of "Hsieh-I" -- writing of the meaning. The next chapter will expand upon these points.



### III: The "Personal Symbolism" and "Hsieh-I"

#### A. Personal Symbolism

When personal symbolism is discussed, one is usually reminded of such names as Odilon Redon, Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst and René Magritte. A list as *impromptu* as the above already reflects a slate of a French Symbolist, a Post Impressionist, a Cubist, and two Surrealists. What I try to clarify here is that, as far as this thesis is concerned, personal symbolism is neither a movement of art nor a school of philosophy but rather a device which some artists adopt in an effort to suggest and move their audience beyond the limitation of time and place.

The history of symbolism can be traced back to pre-historic times when literature did not exist. Making symbols was one of the most common phenomena in human societies. Images of snake, symbolizing fertility and power, appeared in cultures of China, Egypt, and Columbia. Other symbols such as "sun" suggesting day, righteousness, masculinity, "moon" representing night, secret, femininity, are universal. Contrary to these universal symbols, symbols used in the thesis paintings were personal and have been tinged with the oriental concept of "Hsieh-I".

#### B. Hsieh-I

"Hsieh-i" means "writing the meaning". It is an art trend which flourished in China in the first half of the 18th century, led by "the Eight Eccentrics of Yang-Chou", and again during the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, represented by the Shanghai School painters. The beginning of "Hsieh-I" painting was attributed by art historians

to different periods, most often the 10th century, but also the 12th and 13th centuries, and sometimes not until the 17th century.<sup>31</sup>

The word "Hsieh" means "to write" and refers to the painter's brush work, which resembles the calligraphic manner of writing in a loose technique. The word "I" indicates "meaning" and refers to the content of work, drawing attention to the significance and substance of things. It is typical that this endeavour to stress significance in painting deepens interest in the study and observation of nature, and more over, accepts the status of the subject in the work. It forces the artist to express his own personal attitude to the world depicted. "Hsieh-i" painting is a matter not only of less controlled brushwork as it sometimes suggests, but also of giving greater vent to the artist's imagination and ideas. Perhaps for this reason, most works of the "Hsieh-I" style show a far more direct feeling for life than the pictures of the traditionalists.<sup>32</sup>

In each of the four-season paintings, some off-white calligraphic lines (symbols) were drawn on the surfaces of different bottles and glasses with the concept of "Hsieh-I", "writing the meaning", in mind. The intention was to signify the deeper meaning and substance of these still-lives and their changing nature; though unlike many of the "Hsieh-I" style paintings, the applications of the brushwork in "Still-Lives in Four Seasons" were more controlled. At the beginning of the series such as in the summer painting, these marks were merely made to reflect the rhythm and the movement of the season. Yet as ideas and ambition grew, more and more personal feelings and interpretations were added to these marks and symbols. Their meanings and significance will be individually discussed later.

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31, 32. Josef Hejzlar, Chinese Watercolors, p.10.

### C. Personified Still-Lives in Nature as A Metaphor

In "Still-Lives in Four Seasons", the friendly domestic still-lives have been personified and placed in a fenced backdrop of nature. Guarded yet vulnerable, these personified bottles and glasses are exposed to the changing nature for social festivities or perhaps family gatherings. Like the deities in ancient Greek myths, men love and hate, drink to celebrate, when all goes well. But beautiful, happy scenes are often transient, the wiser never cease to calculate the hidden threats of nature, even when life is at its best. Such awareness of the fluidity of life helps to maintain one's modesty and compassion and gives rise to the beginning of all genuine humanity without pity and arrogance.

The intense relationship, from untenable to harmonious, between the personified still-life objects and their backdrop of nature in these paintings, is then intended as a metamorphosis of man's similar state of being.

### D. Personal Symbolism and "Hsieh-I" in "Still-Lives in Four Seasons"

Summer is a season of passion and of vigor for living. "Still-Life in Summer" (Illustration 11) was meant to reflect that. The palette is rich and vibrant, the composition balanced and dynamic. It is indeed a beautiful scene of festivity, but not without hidden threats. Flowers are in full bloom, leaves stretch to expand. On the center of the largest bottle, two rhythmic solid white lines move swiftly in a horizontal direction to suggest the movement of the season. The personified goblets and jars look indulged and relaxed but are overwhelmed by luxuriant plants. Four plump red bees with vicious long stingers move decisively against the growing direction of the plants, forming a circulating oval motion. This encroaching motion



produces an unsettling tension by the threats of the unfriendly flying creatures. The metaphor in this painting is quite revealing itself. Nevertheless as darkness starts to cave in, the night has begun; the gentle murmur of the summer breeze seems to be muttering:

*"So we'll go no more aroving so late into the night.  
Though the heart be still as loving,  
and the moon be still as bright.*

*For the sword outwears its sheath,  
and the soul wears out the breast,  
and the heart must pause to breathe,  
and love itself must rest.*

*Though the night was made for loving,  
and the day returns too soon,  
Still we'll go no more aroving  
by the light of the moon".<sup>33</sup>*

Autumn is a mesmerizing season of mellow and calm fulfillment. It is time of harvest and migration. In "Still-Life in Autumn" (Illustration 12), men and nature are at peace with each other. The personified bottles and glasses, surrounded by nature's splendid display of colors, look content and secure. Compared with the summer painting, the composition for "Still-Life in Autumn" is much more balanced but relatively static. The entire canvas is saturated with plants, creatures and patterns; yet nothing stirs except those migrating birds that fly ever so gracefully on the upper right corner. The intention was to achieve a sense of calm fulfillment. On two goblets and a Beaujolais bottle, eight wavy "Hsieh-I" lines were made to suggest the poetic, vertical movement of the falling leaves. The

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33. George Gordon Byron, "So We'll Go No More A Roving".

reason of writing down these motions is like reciting a poem -- it awakens one's tired senses to see and to feel once again the essence of nature.

With the same rationale, a much subtler but more ambitious symbol was painted on the large bird at the upper right end of the painting. It is a horizontal bar that runs across the trunk of the bird. This bird is unusually large in proportion to its peers in the sky and the crossbar distinguishes it further from the other two birds. The horizontal bar symbolizes a cane, a sign of "difference" and "handicap". In the fantasy world that appears to be pleasantly mellow and almost perfect, the larger bird, though different from its companions and protruding in the picture, is just as graceful and dignified. Therein perhaps lies the true meaning of perfection -- not one of uniformity, but one that maintains its tolerance and saves its soft spots for the different.

Winter could be beautiful, but nevertheless it is a season of weariness. If it is true that *"the motions of our minds follow the temperature of the air wherein we live"*,<sup>34</sup> then for those who have lost their friends or loved ones, the gloomy days and lowering nights of winter only bring with them heaviness of heart. These are times when hopes and spiritual wisdom are the only healing herb.

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34. From the Dedicatory Epistle prefixed to the old tragedy of "Tancred and Gismund" by William Shakespeare, -- "And now that weary winter is come upon us, which bringeth with him drooping days and tedious nights, if it be true that the motions of our minds follow the temperture of the air wherein we live, then I think the perusing of some mournful matter tending to the view of a notable example, will refresh your wits in gloomy day, and ease your weariness of the lowering night."

The metaphor in "Still-Life in Winter" (Illustration 13) is spiritual. The concept of personal symbolism and "Hsieh-I" in this thesis have been carried to its furthest. Winter has come and parties are long over. Creatures disappear from the sky, leaves and branches scatter over the table. Without knowing why, some bottles and glasses are left in the cold. A gloomy scene it must have been, if the wind has not been kind and the sight has not been sprinkled with glistening snow. The same ruthless nature now quietly unveils its dazzling beauty. The gentle twigs on the branches, the curling leaves on the table, along with the still-lives, seem to form an orchestra that plays soothing wintry songs for those who turned into dust and others who mourn them.

Three lines, forming a shape of flame, were drawn on the slender bottle with a cap resembling a tall hat. While the flame provides warmth and direction, this bottle symbolizes a mentor, a person of compassion. The cognac bottle at the front left is metamorphosed into a sitting Buddha. If one examines its silhouette starting from the neck, the dropping shoulders and then the wider thigh areas, it resembles an oriental Buddha in a sitting position (see Illustration 15). While the curved line descending from the left shoulder to the right thigh suggests the drape that the Buddha wears, the other wavy line across the lower thigh indicates Buddha's crossed legs and feet.

Although there are different religious interpretations of what Buddha is, it is commonly accepted as a symbol of salvation. And as the standing Buddha suggests mercy and action, the sitting Buddha demonstrates a state of absolute peace and tranquility of the mind and body.

In the bottle right next to the metamorphosed sitting Buddha, one finds a circle and two tall waves, symbolizing the morning sun and the ocean. They are signs of hope. The only still-lives left on the table are two glasses: one is half-buried



by the dead leaves, the other carries a water sign. Water is, by both Hinduism and Christianity, a symbol of purification. If the holy water could purify men's bodies and souls, so must it replenish their dry, bitter hearts. The water sign here is a then also a symbol of replenishment. For the spirits and souls are remote and uncertain, the earthly peace and joy shall rekindle those who must persevere.

A restrained palette was employed for "Still-Life in Winter" as an instrument to induce a cold, wintry atmosphere. Perhaps feeling the pressure of such limitations, every movement of the lines and every color in the palette was manipulated and pushed to its limit. The result is a painting seductive in its appearance but spiritual in its content.

Spring is the season of reproduction. Ice and snow have melted; water's murmuring down the streams. Flowers, wild and domestic, bloom to greet the brisk morning air. And tadpoles swim busily in ponds and creeks. It is the busy time of the year. "Still-Life in Spring" (Illustration 14) tries to capture that cool, zestful spirit.

The entire picnic table was transformed into a swamp; and the still-lives on it are as crowded as the plants behind them. In a goblet near the center-right, two interweaving curves were made to form a symbol for sex. Another sign simulating a pregnant figure were placed in a bottle near the center-left as a symbol of reproduction. These symbols, again, were derived from the oriental concept of "Hsieh-I" to see beyond the superficial appearance of nature, and to unveil its inner meanings and substance.

This, then, completes the sequence from summer to autumn to winter, culminating in a reinvigorating spring.

#### IV. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have tried from both historical survey and from practical inquiries into several paintings to explore a style of art that blends realism and abstraction. The outcome, a series of paintings that emphasized personified still-life objects, has been discussed in this context. Many elements showed the background of an oriental upbringing, and they stand out in the artwork -- retrospectively obvious but certainly not intended *a priori*.

I would like to thank Professors Philip Bornarth, Sheila Wells, and David Dickinson for their friendly guidance and support. I am also indebted to my father, my husband, and my son for their ardent patience and support throughout my graduate career. Last but not least, it is with the warmest feelings that I remember the late Professor Frederick Meyer who guided me into this thesis with so much wit and patience.



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## VI. List of Illustrations

1. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Pablo Picasso, 1907. (Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York).
2. *Still-Life with Pitcher, Candle, and Enamel Pot*, Pablo Picasso, 1945. (Collection of Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris).
3. *The Studio*, Georges Braque, 1949. (Private Collection, New York).
4. *The Studio (V)*, Georges Braque, 1949. (Private collection, Basel).
5. *Still-life Before an Open Window*, Juan Gris, 1915. (Louise and Walter Arensberg collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art).
6. *The Check Table-Cloth*, Juan Gris, 1916. (Collection of Dr. W. Löffler).
7. *Harmony in Red*, Henri Matisse, 1908-09. (The Hermitage collection, Leningrad).
8. *Maple Tree and Autumn Plants*, Hasegawa Tohaku, 1592. (Collection of Chijaku-in, Kyoto).
9. *White and Red Plum Trees*, Ogata Korin, date unknown. (Sekai-kyusei-kyo collection, Atami Museum, Shizuoka-ken).
10. *A Winter's Tale*, Shi-ling C. Hsiang, 1985.
11. *Still-Life in Summer*, Shi-ling C. Hsiang, 1985.
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13. *Still-Life in Winter*, Shi-ling C. Hsiang, 1986.
14. *Still-Life in Spring*, Shi-ling C. Hsiang, 1986.
15. *Large Composition of the World of Reason*, detail: *Shichigutei and Other Divinities*, 951. (Collection of Daigo-ji, Kyoto).





Illustration 1. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)*, Pablo Picasso, 1907.





Illustration 2. Still-Life with Pitcher, Candle, and Enamel Pot,  
Pablo Picasso, 1945.





Illustration 3. The Studio, Georges Braque, 1949.



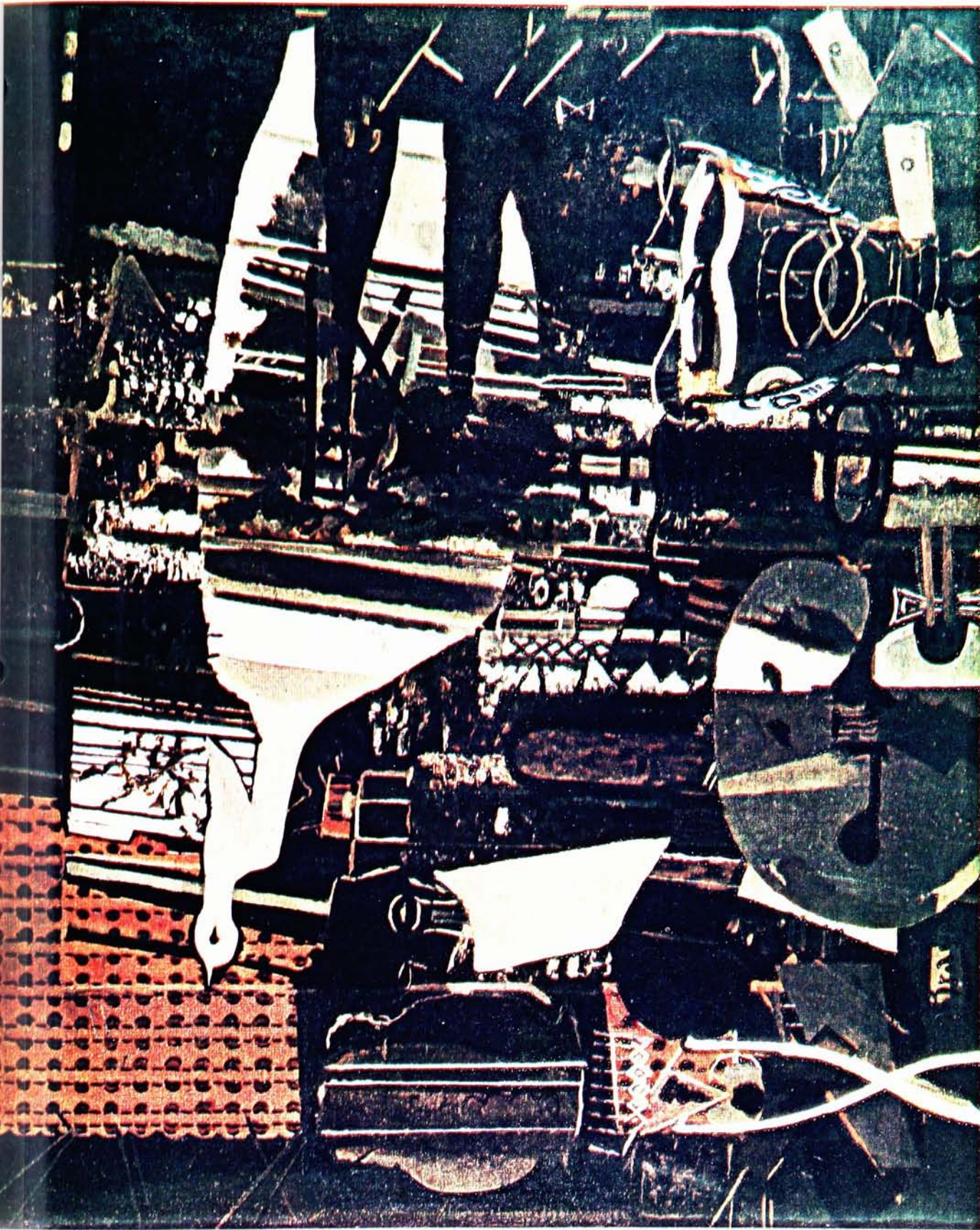


Illustration 4. *The Studio (V)*, Georges Braque, 1949.





Illustration 5. *Still-life Before an Open Window*, Juan Gris, 1915.



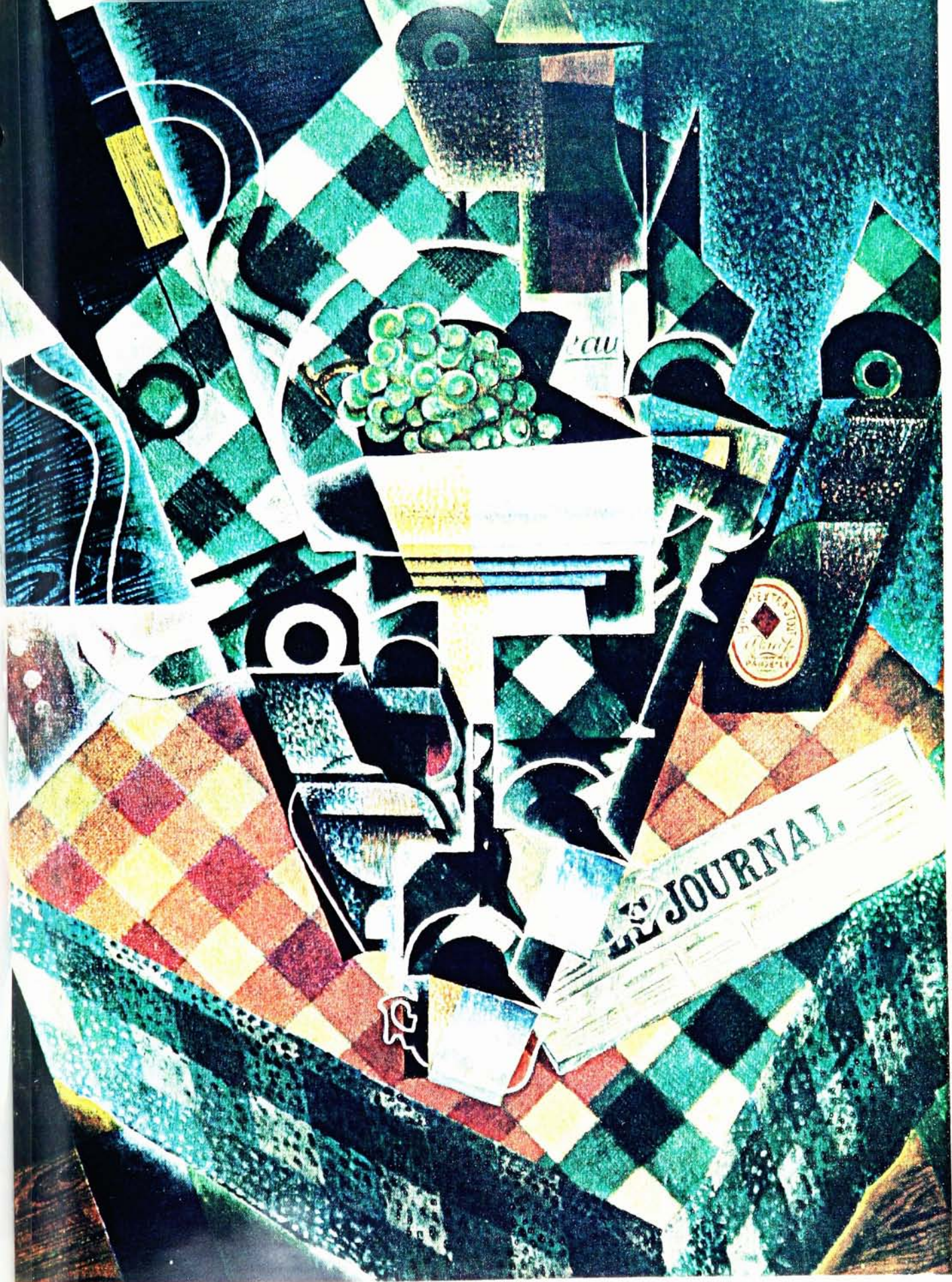


Illustration 6. *The Check Table-Cloth*, Juan Gris, 1916.





Illustration 7. Harmony in Red, Henri Matisse, 1908-09.



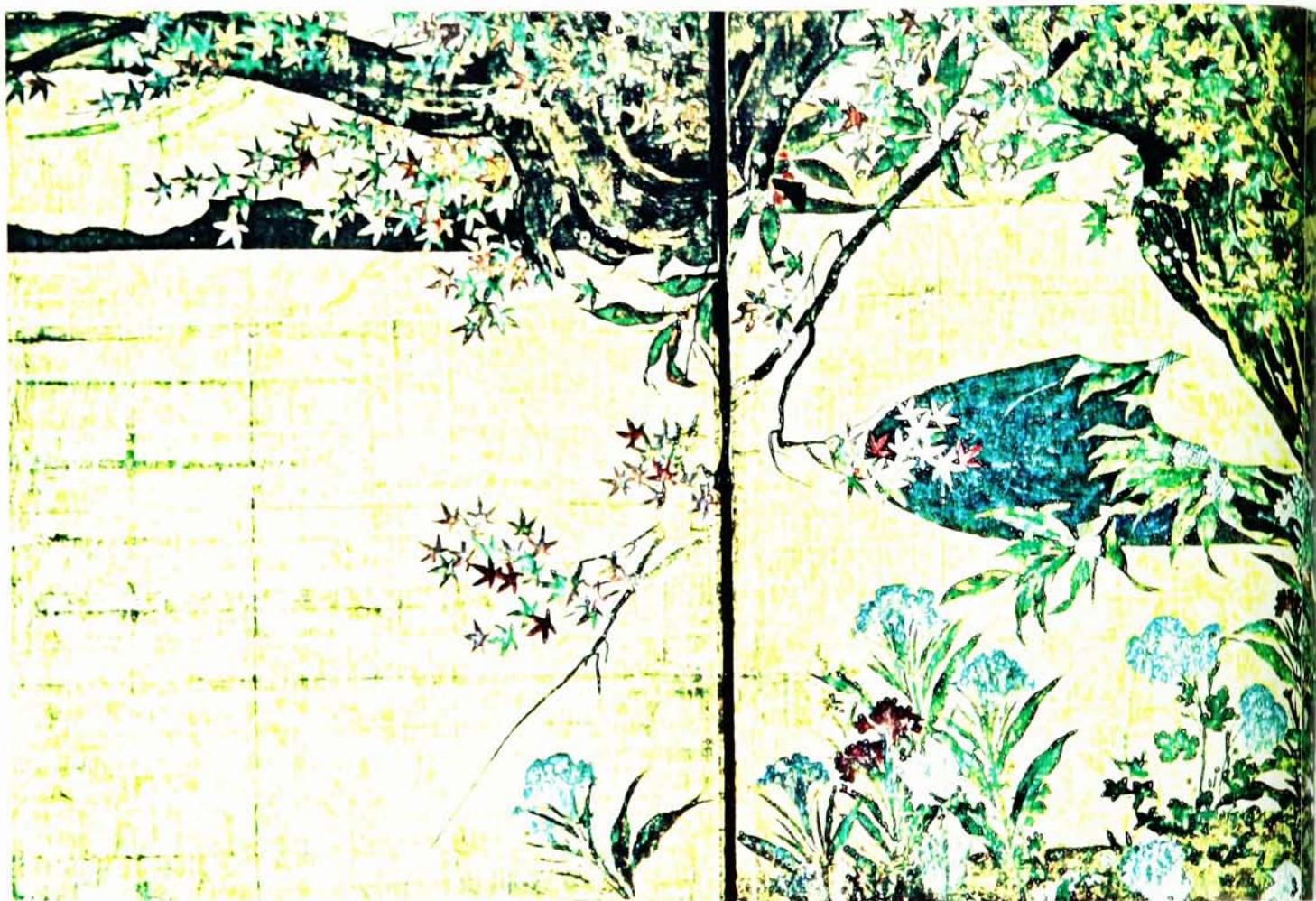






Illustration 8. *Maple Tree and Autumn Plants*, Hasegawa Tohaku, 1592.



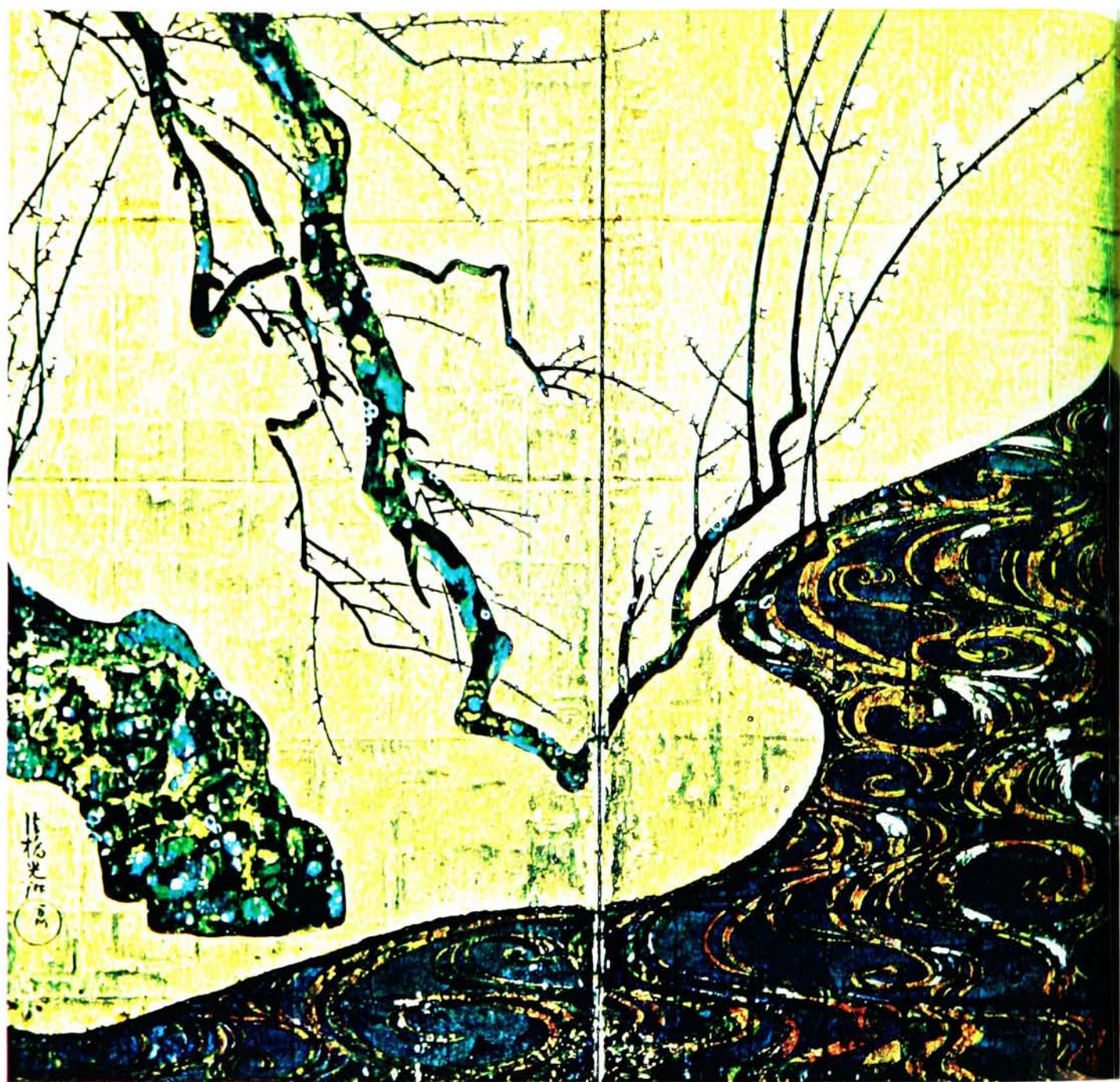






Illustration 9. *White and Red Plum Trees*, Ogata Korin, date unknown.



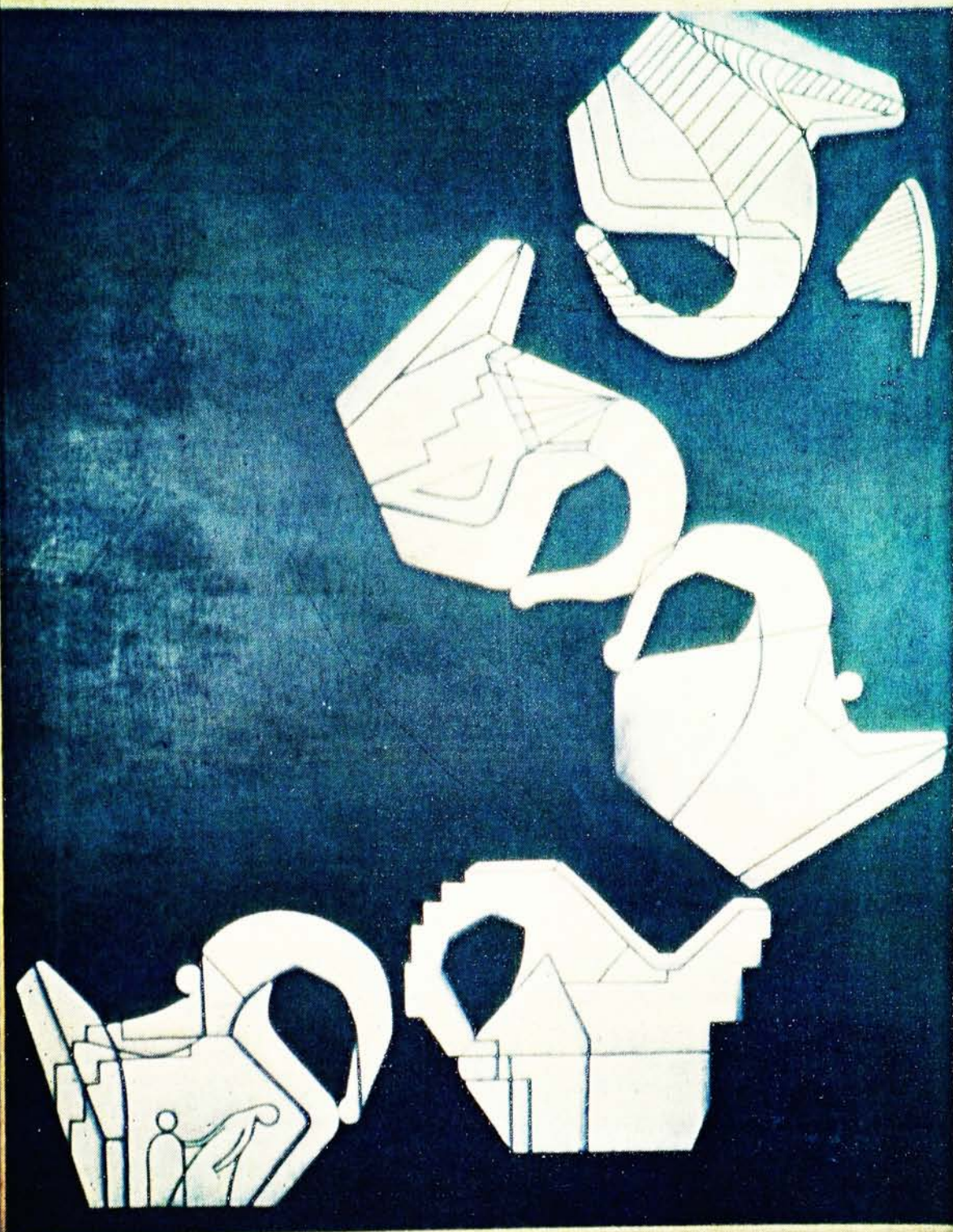


Illustration 10. *A Winter's Tale*, Shi-ling C. Hsiang, 1985.





Illustration 11. Still-Life in Summer, Shi-ling C. Hsiang, 1985.





Illustration 12. Still-Life in Autumn, Shi-ling C. Hsiang, 1985.





Illustration 13. *Still-Life in Winter*, Shi-ling C. Hsiang, 1986.





Illustration 14. *Still-Life in Spring*, Shi-ling C. Hsiang, 1986.





Illustration 15. *Large Composition of the World of Reason, detail: Shichigutei and Other Divinities, 951.*